DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 031 980 FL 001 436

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Nongraded Foreign Language Classes. ERIC Focus Reports on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Number 4.

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, New York, N.Y.; Modern Language Association, New York, N.Y. ERIC Clearinghouse on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

Spons Agency-Modern Language Association of America, New York, N.Y.

Pub Date 69

Note-7p.

Available from-MLA/ACTFL Materials Center, 62 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011 ($.25)

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.45

Descriptors-*Flexible Scheduling, Grouping (Instructional Purposes), Individualized Instruction, Language Ability, Language Enrollment, *Language Instruction, *Language Learning Levels, *Language Programs, Modern Languages, *Nongraded Classes, Schedule Modules, Secondary Schools, Summer Schools

A case is advanced for nongraded foreign language classes as a possible solution to many current problems in foreign language instruction. Favorable results in several experimental nongraded programs in secondary schools and summer schools are cited. An excerpt from an article on ungraded classes in summer schools lists advantages to summer schools (wide ability range) and small high schools (small enrollments in upper level courses), hints on organization of modules, and the problem of record keeping. Apparent hostility to nongraded classes is also discussed. A brief bibliography is included. (AF)

ED031980

ERIC Focus Reports on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

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Number 4

Nongraded Foreign Language Classes

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A Focus Report on . . .

Nongraded Foreign Language Classes

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PROCRUSTES, a mythological robber of ancient Greece, is remembered especially for his treatment of the victims he had tied to an iron bed. If they were too long for the bed, he cut off their legs to make them fit; if they were too short, he stretched them to fit. His system has become proverbially symbolic of inflexibility. In modern education, the "procrustean theory" is well illustrated by the concept of "gradedness." Nowhere is this "gradedness" more evident than in the area of foreign languages.

In foreign languages, prior to 1958, there were traditionally two graded years, usually designated as Foreign Language I and Foreign Language II. Most schools had regulations which specified that no student could get credit for Foreign Language I if he didn't successfully complete Foreign Language II. The standards for completing Foreign Language I and II were the same for all students regardless of their individual aptitudes, capacities, or learning rates. With these rigid standards, foreign language teachers, like Procrustes, had to cut the student to fit the bed instead of adjusting the bed to fit the student. During the last ten years the labels have been changed and now in most schools the term "level" is used. This implies some flexibility, but in many programs flexibility does not exist. Instead, each level becomes a grade and the entire class moves together as a unit through the year's work. It is often referred to by proponents of individualized instruction as "lockstep." But, unlike marching organizations in lockstep, the foreign language class often has as many as forty percent of its students out of step and many who never were in step from the beginning. The high attrition rate between levels or grades shows the effect of such instruction. The academically talented students drop out because they are not sufficiently challenged and are bored; the students with lower learning rates become completely frustrated and bored. The situation today is much more critical than in pre-1958 programs because in those programs there was a certain amount of homogeneity. Only students who could fit into the procrustean bed were *allowed* to enroll. Or they realized what their fate would be in such programs and elected to stay outside.

Today this has changed in most states. A typical statement of policy in most schools might read: "Who should take a foreign language? In general, everyone can profit from foreign language instruction. If you can speak English so that people can understand you, then you can learn another language—if you want to." In effect, students are now being told that foreign language courses have something to offer any student who has the interest and the desire to learn a foreign language and that success is possible. Consequently, students must later question the integrity of people in the profession when they find themselves in the one-channel instruction which characterizes so many course sequences.

In some schools and in some disciplines, nongraded units and classes have been organized which have given the necessary flexibility and release from pressures needed for students to achieve at their optimum learning rate. Although the movement probably gained its greatest momentum in the primary schools, the underlying philosophy has implications for every level and every sub-

ject matter area. As elementary principal Frank R. Dufay wrote, "Common sense, as well as experience and intuition, tells us that children are . . . in the no-two-are-alike category. Unfortunately and paradoxically, common sense is not the common commodity implied by its name. Or it is more possessed than utilized. To illustrate this, we may point to the fact that, despite the apparent uniqueness of each child, American education over the years has been based firmly on the determination that schoolchildren ought to be alike. Pupils have been treated accordingly in the classroom. The resulting frustrations, the unnecessary tragedies have not yet ceased. In classroom after classroom, the creative powers of children continue to be encapsulated by production-line techniques of instruction. Developing personalities are still humiliated and deformed by unreasonable, impossible demands."[1]

Many forces have been hostile to ungrading classes in foreign languages. Modern foreign language curricula are written for mass instruction. Modern textbooks with their accompanying taped drills have been one-channel systems. The tape recorder, used extensively by foreign language teachers in their daily instruction, beams one lesson to all. The use of listen-repeat choral responses by the entire class after the teacher's patterns or taped patterns—a technique demonstrated in many NDEA Institutes—has become standard methodology in most classrooms. The telecast FLES programs, as they are administered in many elementary classrooms, straightjacket pupils and keep them all on dead center. Although new sophisticated language laboratories are multi-channeled, inflexible school schedules, lack of supervisory staff for library use of the labs, and scarcity of programed taped materials prevent their use by individual students outside the structured class periods. Marking and credit systems are out of step with the nongrading concept. Our marking systems are geared to standardization of achievement and our credit system is tied to marks and time spent in class. The teachers feel a need to have everyone "cover" the same kind and amount of material, and their fears of criticism from the colleges and from other language teachers who might get some of their transfer students are further obstacles to a nongraded organization.

A successful nongraded experience has been carried on in one high school in Minnesota for a couple of years; unfortunately, no hard data are available because no controlled evaluation has been carried out. The program successfully met a need of the school district at the time and this was the major evaluative criterion. The need arose because too many students were "out of cycle" with the regular graded classes. A few examples of students who were enrolled include:

STUDENTS 1 & 2——Two students had completed German Levels I and II with high levels of achievement, but were definitely not being challenged. Both were academically talented, and had completed Levels III and IV in one year in the nongraded class. This was documented by standardized test scores and by placement tests when they entered college the following September.

STUDENT 3——A beginning student with an I.Q. of eighty-two worked solely with programed texts and tapes and completed about half of Level I in his first year in the nongraded class. He was well motivated and enjoyed the opportunity to work at his own pace with no pressures. This class provided a friendly environment to which he was not accustomed during most of his school life.

STUDENTS 4 & 5——These two students had attended two German summer camps where they had acquired competencies beyond their classmates' in the graded class.

STUDENTS 6 & 7——These two boys had lived three years in Germany while their fathers served with the U. S. military forces. Their audio-lingual skills were far more advanced than their reading and writing competencies.

Students were grouped within the nongraded class according to achievement in each skill. It was not uncommon for students to be working with Level III materials, for example, in speaking and listening, but with Level I in reading and writing; the opposite was also true. Regrouping was possible at any time that achievement indicated it was necessary.

Summer school foreign language programs have been growing continuously and have furnished excellent settings for nongraded

[1] Frank R. Dufay, *Upgrading the Elementary School* (West Nyack, N. Y.: Parker Publishing Co., 1966), p. 17.

experiments. As well as providing summer study opportunities for students on several levels of language learning, they have provided opportunities for teachers to gain initial experience in working with nongraded groups. Schools have had to search for, and acquire, a variety of materials that were programed, or otherwise highly structured, to use with basic texts. Then these materials were available for regular classes when school began in the fall (thereby strengthening any attempts toward nongrading during the year). Since 1966, all superintendents have been sent the following information for consideration before they begin planning their summer school schedules:

The ungraded class is an excellent setting for responding to students with wide ranges of ability and learning rates. It can comfortably accommodate the gifted learner in the same class and at the same time as the slow learner. In only a very few schools in the country, however, has the ungraded foreign language class progressed beyond the experimental stage, although the potential for this type of class organization is great. Hopefully, as experiments along this line are completed and their results are published, and as teacher training institutions expand their teaching about this type of organization, the number of these classes should grow. The ungraded class has many important implications for the Minnesota foreign language program. The State has many small high schools with small enrollments in foreign languages in the upper level courses. Oftentimes this enrollment is too small to justify scheduling a separate section. The summer school director is likely to find his situation to be the same as that found in the small high school For example, he may have three or four students enrolled in Level II, two or three students in Level IV, and the same number in Level V. Furthermore, the ability range and the learning rate of foreign language summer school students often seem to be very broad. The structure and organization of the ungraded class lends itself very favorably to accommodate such a diversified group.

Some modifications of ungraded classes have been developed in a few summer school foreign language programs in the state. Expansion and upgrading of these classes into other schools would strengthen the whole summer school foreign language structure. Eligible and interested students would not then be turned away from participating in a foreign language program in summer school. Many slow students, who might require twice the time to complete a level of work as compared with the average student, are comfortable in the ungraded class because they can progress at their own rate and do not feel the pressures that often are on them in regular class structure. The academically talented and gifted student can complete work far beyond the material prescribed for a single level.

The ungraded class should be kept relatively small. This gives the teacher time to prepare materials and to individualize his work with the students. A great variety of programed materials should be provided along with basic and supplementary materials for all the language skills.

Students must share in the planning for their daily schedule, which can be broken into four fifteen-minute modules. These modules could include learning experiences and activities in the categories of: (1) aural-oral, (2) reading, (3) writing, (4) recitation, and (5) conference with teacher. It would not be necessary to provide for all these activities every day. An individual student or small groups of students could plan with the teacher any combination of modules and learning activities to reach the immediate objectives. In the ungraded classroom organization, it is necessary that each student keep a daily plan. The teacher can incorporate these into a master class plan so that he knows exactly what each student is doing at all times.

One of the problems that has existed within the ungraded classes is record keeping. Under present conditions, it probably will be best to use the level label and grant credit for the level that would correspond to the chronological year of language study. For example, if a student is in his third year of studying French, he would be labeled and credited for French, Level III, even though his work went beyond the normal work covered for Level III. For those whose achievement fell short of what is normally expected, they too should be given credit for Level III as long as they worked up to their optimum. Some teachers, in order to explain the grading and credit for the slow learner, make a notation on the permanent record or include an anecdotal report to interpret the terms in relation to progress. As experiments continue with the ungraded class, teachers should develop new and needed insights in this area.

The ungraded foreign language class offers an exciting new possibility in programing, organizing, scheduling, and teaching for advanced foreign language students in summer school as well as regular school programs.[2]

When the Melborne High School in Florida ungraded its curriculum, it was able to offer

[2] "The Ungraded Class," *Foreign Language in the Summer School Program* (St. Paul, Minn.: State of Minnesota, Dept. of Education), pp. 6–9.

more foreign languages. Under the graded curriculum, only Spanish and Latin were offered. After ungrading, the school added French, German, Russian, and Chinese; a Latin American History course taught in Spanish; and Hebrew taught after the regular school day.[3] Without a nongraded curriculum many schools are tempted or pressured to add more languages than the total enrollments of the graded schools can support, thus ending up with just Level I and Level II classes in each language because of insufficient upper level enrollments. Flexible groupings in nongraded sections offer a solution to this problem because minimum numbers per level are not necessary for including the offerings in the nongraded curriculum.

An exciting new proposal for a nongraded 7–12 foreign language program has been drafted and submitted by the school district in West Bend, Wisconsin. Major objectives listed for this program include:

1. Providing a foreign language program that meets the needs of all students regardless of ability and will better enable them to serve the community in which they live.
2. Changing the foreign language program from one which is based on time criteria to one which is based on performance criteria.
3. Providing a more practical language program in terms of more realistic individual goals and more practical stimulation for students at all ability levels.
4. Providing a program that will offer maximum flexibility in scheduling for the individual student.
5. Providing a program that will offer maximum flexibility in scheduling in terms of the entire curriculum.[4]

An interesting and seemingly necessary phase of this proposal is that all beginning students would be kept together in a large group instruction situation through the initial phase, during which they would be presented with a predetermined number of introductory units of work. The proposal states that group instruction would be a practical necessity during the introductory period in order to achieve:

1. Instruction in the basic skills of the language learning processes.
2. Group practice leading to the development of a sound background in the pronunciation and audio-comprehension skills.
3. Development of the proper attitude and discipline necessary for language learning.
4. Training in the skills and procedures which the student will later need as he moves on into the individualized instruction part of the program.

Upon successful completion of the introductory phase, the students would be allowed to proceed at an individualized rate of progress.[5]

During the last couple of years, the development and acceptance of flexible (modular) schedules in many secondary schools has increased the incidence of modified nongrading patterns in many foreign language programs. Instruction in most of the flexible (modular) schedules is defined as four types: (1) Independent and Individual, (2) Small Group, (3) Laboratory, and (4) Large Group.[6] In schools using this design, students assume a much greater responsibility for their own learning progress. Most students have up to forty percent of their time scheduled as independent and individual study and laboratory activity. When these students meet with the teacher in the classroom, the teacher finds that their points of progress are so varied that new methods of grouping based on levels of achievement for individual students must be set up rather than by assignment of students on the basis of amount of time spent in the course or the mark received for the work.

A bulletin published by Science Research Associates indicates that many teachers are not mentally equipped or trained for nongrading, that teaching materials are not adequate for nongraded plans, and that there is no research proof that nongrading leads to more learning. The bulletin goes on to state, however, that nongrading does:

1. Allow greater scheduling flexibility.

[3] B. Frank Brown, *The Nongraded High School* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 89.

[4] *Continuous Progress Foreign Language Program* (West Bend, Wis.: West Bend Public Schools, Joint Dist. No. 1, 1967), p. 2.

[5] Ibid., p. 3.

[6] Robert N. Bush and Dwight W. Allen, *A New Design for High School Education—Assuming a Flexible Schedule* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 35–38.

2. Offer a chance to students who are "out of sequence" to work where they are, and not where a graded group is.
3. Free children to learn at their own rate.
4. Make advanced language study possible when enrollments in advanced levels are insufficient to justify a separate section.[7]

As greater flexibility is introduced into school schedules, foreign language teachers will be compelled to explore designs for following through with this flexibility in their foreign language classes. A hard and appraising look will have to be taken at the concept of unlocking the graded class and changing one-channeled instruction into a multi-channeled system. When this is accomplished, dead center teaching will become dead methodology.

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